

Water Vole Survey & Assessment
Plot L, Kingsway Business Park, Rochdale

DLA Architecture Ltd.

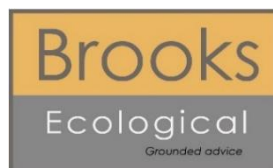
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Summary Statement

Survey has confirmed the likely absence of water vole from the on-site watercourse and ditch.

In line with guidance two surveys were undertaken of the Site, an early survey in April and second survey in late August, both survey efforts included physical search for field signs and a period of camera trapping.

No evidence of water vole was found or suspected and as such a likely absence of this species has been concluded from the Site. Further survey or specific precautions in relation to water vole are not recommended.

Introduction

1. Brooks Ecological was commissioned to carry out an updating water vole survey at the proposed development Site known as Plot L, Kingsway Business Park, Rochdale.
2. The survey was focussed along a remnant section of watercourse and ditches, likely created when the Site was reprofiled in anticipation of development many years ago; as highlighted in Figure 1 overleaf.

Legal Background

3. In England, water voles are protected under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981), receiving full protection since 2008. This Act, together with amending legislation, lists the following as offences:
 - intentionally killing, taking or injuring water voles (Section 9(1));
 - possessing or controlling any live or dead water voles, or any part or derivative (Section 9(2));
 - intentionally or recklessly damaging or destroying a water vole's place of shelter or protection (Section 9(4)(a));
 - intentionally or recklessly disturbing a water vole whilst it is occupying a structure or place which it uses for shelter or protection (Section 9(4)(b));
 - intentionally or recklessly obstructing access to a water voles place of shelter or protection (Section 9(4)(c));
 - selling, offering for sale, or possessing or transporting for the purposes of sale, any live or dead water vole, or any derivative, or advertising any of these for buying or selling (Section 9(5)).
4. It is generally agreed that a place of shelter or protection used by water vole includes a network of active burrows and/or any nests that have been constructed within the burrow system or above ground amongst dense vegetation.
5. Water voles occupy a variety of water's edge habitats but can also be found away from water in some regions of the UK. Their places of shelter are normally found within 2m of the water's edge and comprise a series of connected burrows with both above water and under water entrances.

Background

6. The Site is adjacent to Plot M, off the northern boundary. Plot M previously supported Turf Hill Marsh, where historic water vole survey has been carried out during the initial stages of the development of Kingsway Business Park.
7. At this time Turf Hill Marsh supported a population of water vole in what was considered sub-optimal habitat, but which was linked to a population in Sudden Brook which fed the Marsh from the west. Sudden Brook was lost during the development of the Kingsway Business Park, having been trapped out under license, along with Turf Hill Marsh, during 2006-2007. Monitoring of the remaining Turf Hill Marsh area continued for several years after trapping ceased – concluding likely absence on all occasions.
8. As such, continuing surveys of other potential water vole habitat, focused around good potential habitat in the Stanney Brook area, concluded their likely loss from the wider Site in 2018. This is likely due to the continuing presence of mink, general pressures from development, and increases in the numbers of people (particularly dog-walkers) using the area. At this point water vole were considered to have been lost from the Site altogether, and for the purposes of on-going development the risk of impacting on water vole were considered negligible.
9. During late summer 2021, Brooks Ecological were made aware (by GMEU) of a newly logged record of water vole, dated from 2019, and relating to Turf Hill Marsh. The record was provided by a reliable source and "on the 1st November 2019 reported 'Potential feeding signs -Clump of rush with angled cuts'".
10. Following this, surveys were again carried out during 2021, with the primary focus being Turf Hill Marsh itself. Other potentially suitable areas of Plot M were also surveyed, these being terrestrialising ponds and ditches to the northeast of the Site. A likely absence of water vole was concluded following surveys, and Plot M, and the Turf Hill Marsh, have now been built on.

Method

11. Survey followed the methodology for field survey outlined in Dean and Strachan (2016).
12. In this case, early season visits were completed on 5th and 19th April 2023, with camera traps running for the intervening 14 days. The late season visits were undertaken on the 16th and 31st August, with camera traps running for the intervening 15 days.
13. Survey was carried out from the banks of the beck and ditch, and where safe to do so within the channel. With the surveyor attempting to locate evidence of water vole including the following field signs:
 - Water vole latrines
 - Sightings of water vole
 - Water vole tunnel entrances
 - Water vole "lawns"
 - Water vole feeding stations
 - Water vole footprints
14. The presence of water vole droppings is the only field sign that can be used reliably on its own.
15. Experience is required to distinguish between feeding remains, burrows and footprints of water vole and other species. However, a combination of these field signs in close proximity is highly suggestive of water vole presence.

Limitations

16. Dense vegetation preventing direct access is present along sections of the watercourse, however these are limited in area and much of it remains accessible.
17. To overcome this constraint, and increase detectability, three floating latrines and remote camera traps were deployed in strategic locations, with two along the ditch and one along the watercourse. This is a survey method that has proven very effective in similarly densely vegetated habitats. Camera traps were deployed on 5th April and collected in on 19th April, as were floating latrines with apples fixed as bait. Floating latrine areas were not used on the second visit due to low water levels, though apples were still fixed within camera view to act as bait.

Figure 1 Site area (red line), with survey areas, the ditch and watercourse also shown (blue line).



Results - April

Habitat Assessment

18. Two areas were subject to survey, being the watercourse and the ditch as shown in Figure 1.
19. The watercourse is a remnant section of what was once a continuous stream, but now only flows through part of Plot L. As such, waterflow has been significantly altered by previous phases of development associated with Kingsway Business Park upstream of the Site. It now supports only a limited water flow, despite survey being early in the year when water levels should be higher. Banks and the channel are shallow, except for a brief section where there are steeper stone banks, making it sub-optimal for water vole. Woodland and tree cover is present but is open and suitable foraging opportunities could be present beneath.
20. The ditch was likely created when the Site was partially levelled during a much earlier phase of construction works. It is varied in depth, with the eastern section supporting deeper water but shallower banks, whilst further west it is shallower with more substantial banks. As such some opportunities for burrows are present but limited to western areas. Surrounding grassland would make for suitable foraging areas and much of the Site is a wet grassland particularly over winter which may also support suitable foraging habitat.

Figure 2 Watercourse, mostly dry in this section.



Figure 3a Wetter section of ditch with shallow banks



Figure 3b Drier section with steeper banks



Field Signs

21. No evidence of water vole activity was observed during the bankside inspections, and no evidence of them was deposited on any of the floating latrines or recorded on any of the camera traps.

Results - August

Habitat Assessment

22. Habitats remain similar, though water levels were lower with much of the water course entirely dry and vegetation more overgrown as would be expected in late summer.

Figure 4 Camera trap close up of ditch with shallow water to the north.



Field Signs

23. No evidence of water vole activity was observed during the bankside inspections.
24. Likewise they were not recorded on any of the camera traps, though several rats, mice, deer, birds and a cat were recorded. The cat was observed walking along the bed of the watercourse indicative of how dry it has become and of poor suitability for water vole in general.
25. Rats are easily distinguished from water vole by their more prominent ears and pointed noses, as well as hairless tails, as can be seen in figure 5a.

Figure 5a Camera trap still of large rat



Figure 5b Two young deer in dried up watercourse



Conclusions & Recommendations

26. Two surveys carried out in line with guidance during April and August 2023 have confirmed the likely absence of water vole from the watercourse and ditch.
27. Further specific survey or precautionary measures related to water vole are not recommended.

Ecological Enhancement

28. It is anticipated the Site will be significantly reprofiled during development, however, even in the absence of water vole, riparian habitats are of value and landscaping should seek to incorporate similar features to those lost. These should be planted and sown with a mix of suitable native marginal and aquatic plant species to maximise value to wildlife.

References

CIEEM (2019) Advice Note - On the Lifespan of Ecological Reports and Surveys

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